

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE PREJUDICED PORTRAYAL OF OEDIPUS AND ELECTRA COMPLEX IN ANITHA DESAI'S CRY, THE PEACOCK & VOICES IN THE CITY

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ABSTRACT

The prime responsibility of Literature is to hold a mirror to nature. Serious writers concern themselves with the serious aspects of human nature. The psychic state of man and woman had always been artistically articulated by writers for centuries now. Anita Desai, in particular, should be given the credit for adding a new dimension to the Indian writing in English by shifting the attention of the writers from outer occurrences to the inner state of being. Her novels are psychological novels and are written to explore the terror of human existence. To depict lone individuals facing single-handedly the ferocious assaults of existence was her literary mission. In her earnest efforts to achieve her mission, she could not hold her breath for the fear of arresting or directing that the natural likeness of the characters as Henry James expects. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar points it out very gently when he says that Anita Desai is surer with her female Characters like Maya, Monisha, Sita or Nanda Kaul than with her male characters. But any serious reader of Anita Desai would tell that the author marginalizes men in order to help her women shine in contrast. Oedipus and Electra are complexes exposing the psychic abnormalcy of the male and the female. Desai's portrayal imparts semblance of virtue to one and vice to the other. Father fixation brings out the love and affection of Maya and makes her look more lovable and more and more human. But, the Mother fixation brings out the brute in the man, Nirode of Voices in the City and makes him look less and less human. This gender bias in Anita Desai is the subject of study in this article.

KEYWORDS: novels are psychological novels, Oedipus and Electra are complexes exposing & Voices in the City and makes him look less and less human

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INTRODUCTION

Of Anita Desai, Shyam M. Asnani writes

Her forte is the exploration of the interior world, plunging into the limitless depths of the mind and bringing into relief the hidden contours of human Psyche. (Asnani, 1984.5)

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar puts it better when he says

in Anita Desai's novels, the inner climate, the climate of sensibility that lours or clears or rumbles like thunder or suddenly blazes forth like lightning is more compelling than the outer weather, the physical geography or the

Visible action. (Iyengar, 2001, 464)

Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex and Electra complex are the harsh facts about the human psyche. Freud called it a universal psychological condition and also affirmed that it forms an indissoluble link between a wish and law. Nevertheless, two of the characters in the novels of Anita Desai experience this complex. Maya in *Cry, The Peacock*, (Desai's first novel) and Nirode in *Voices in the City*, (her second). The prejudice that the author shows in the depiction of these two complexes is quite striking and interesting.

Oedipus Complex in Voices in the City

Nirode, the principal male character of Desai's second novel *Voices in the City* is an intellectual wreck. The story is set in Calcutta and a sense of gloom and doom overwhelms the character of Nirode, one among the many capably incapable dangerous intellects of Bengal. The impression one gets about Nirode is that he is a negativist, parasite and a pervert. To cap it all he suffers from mother fixation. Surprisingly, his competitor was not his father, but Major Chanda, his neighbour of his disturbed state of mind Desai tells

*and between him and his mother's brilliant territory there
existed a barbed wire fence, all glittering and vicious.
To his astonishment he found at his side, also on the wrong
side of this cruel division, his father Something distracted her,
footsteps, a voice and she turned to greet, with a ravishing
Smile her neighbours that retired Major.... His mother sat on
the veranda, smiling a slow sensual smile... (VC 28)*

Nirode puts on a rough and strong exterior; he is in fact made up of very feeble mettle. He believed in nothing. Nirode doubted his magazine 'Voice', He doubted his friend Jit, Sony and above all he doubted his own learned self. More than his inborn inabilities it is his undesirable fixation that he had no weapon to fight with. Like a true hero of an absurd drama, Nirode spoke rejecting everything. His illogical logic irritates and even upsets the readers. About his magazine *Voice* this is what he has to say

*I want it to fail quickly. Then I want to see if I have the
Spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want
to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom.
I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all
You found at the top is space; all you can do is leap off, fall
to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless
Climbing. I want to descend, quickly (VC 40)*

In the city of Calcutta, Nirode had gone astray. A letter from his mother that ought to have been a source of comfort to a lad away from home surprisingly only irritated him. He read the letter grudgingly.

'My golden son, I remember you', wrote the mother all in affection but the son spat venom

Major Chanda-how unashamedly she wrote that hideous

name, so like a cooking pot full of yellow food, or a rag

of dirty underwear how helpful was this Chanda, providing

her with male company and admiration... (VC 37)

Probably this complex in him is responsible for his aversion to the institution of marriage.

Marriage, bodies, touches and tortures all that had to do with

marriage was destructive, negative, and decadent. (VC 35)

Nirode, hopelessly hoped to tear up his roots and transplant them in the world of his imagination. He wished to have nothing with his family. He, on account of his excessive hatred for his mother because of her undue appreciation of her neighbour, Major Chanda's romantic advances, disliked having anything to do with his family. When his mother expressed her desire to open a bank account in Nirode's name, his reaction was violent and terribly disturbing. He, as expected by Monisha herself, turned down the offer in the most unpleasant manner possible. He spoke bitterly

Tell her to go shove it up that old major of hers, all her stinking cheques.

Tell her I want no share of it, no share of banks or finance or insurance

and all the rest of her bleeding equipment. Tell her she will never

get me to sign my name or fill in a form.

I'll not put my name to anything again, to be gloated over by her

or smacked at by those theatre group goats.

I'm done with signing my name believing my name,

or having a name. Tell her that I am nameless. (VC 134)

The choice of words reveals the degree of degradation he had attained is unimaginably horrible it is, for a son to talk of his mother in such low terms as **'her stinking cheques', 'her bleeding equipment'** etc. Desai rightly calls him **a fanatic an a shadowy Cipher** (VC 64)

Nirode's utter indifference to Amla, his sister is absolutely shocking. Poor Amla approached him for help when she fell in love with Dharma, the married, mystic painter. Nirode asked her to go home and take lessons in love from her mother. He further continued to say many things to the astonishment of his helpless sister. His sexist remark shocks not only Amla but also the readers

Oh, she has a vast store of them, you'd learn by that..Ask

her about the love that makes her perch on her mountain top

and the last wormy twisting of lust to send Major Chanda -

Chanda! - into her open arms. (VC 190)

Amla, even in the wildest of her imaginations wouldn't have ever seen a son spitting so much of venom on his mother. She tried to put sense into him but he went on to say the most terrible things about his mother's relationship with Major Chanda

and his red pop eyes trying to nudge the sari off her shoulder.

I can see her leaning across to give him a good look into her blouse,

saying 'Aa-ha-ha, I have you now. (VC191)

Quite understandably Amla was shattered by the rashness of her brother. She screamed in absolute astonishment

My God, Nirode, you cannot live here in this foul hole, imagining

the world to be so depraved. It is you; it is you, who are depraved,

Who makes love into something ugly and degenerate you can be a

rat, Nirode, a rat (VC 191)

Monisha, another sister of Nirode commits suicide. In her funeral Nirode speaks poetry and Philosophy. But the poetry and Philosophy reveal only his emotional emptiness. All through his life, Nirode tries not to care or commit. Nirode is depicted to be a total failure. As a son he is intolerable. As a friend, he is untrusting. As a brother, he is horrible and as an individual he is still worse. He does no justice to his own pitiable self. His Oedipus complex ruins him beyond retrieval. Rashmi Gaur, after a detailed study of the character of Nirode says

His psychic imbalance has stemmed from his unresolved love-hate relationship with

his mother. His rejection of happiness and life itself has resulted from a vision blurred

by traditional gender bias and centuries of indoctrination about relating to women

Within pre-decided relationships only. (Gaur, 2003)

Violence in thoughts, violence in words and violence in deeds show Nirode in poor light. There is no single convincing trait in him that readers find worth admiring. In the eyes of the readers, Nirode, only shrinks and shrinks right through every single page of the novel.

'Electra Complex' in Cry, the Peacock

Cry, the Peacock, the novel with which Anita Desai entered the world of literature is perhaps the best of her even after 50 years. In these 50 productive years of her literary career, Desai had authored some of the outstanding novels in Indian Writing in English like Baumgartner's Bombay, Journey to Ithaca, In Custody, Fire on the Mountain and Clear Light of the Day. Yet the first novel stands out to be outstanding. Marital discard due to temperamental incompatibility is very much the theme of the novel. Maya is married to Gautama, a man of her father's age only to find a father substitute in him. Gautama, the intellect, proves to be a sorry substitute. The mismatch is so total and so perfect that one wonders if anything good could ever come out of it. Meena Belliappa puts it beautifully when she says that One (Maya) could feel without touching and the other could touch without feeling. The man behind the mischief was Maya's gentle father. He was the one who wanted Maya to marry his friend Gautama. In fact Gautama himself says once to Maya

You have a very obvious father obsession-which is also the reason why you married

me, a man so much older than yourself. (CP 146)

S. P. Swain precisely attributes Maya's alienation from her husband to her affinity to her father.

The father in the unconscious impinges on the husband in the conscious,

thereby creating marital discord in her conjugal life. (Swain.1992, 47)

The father obsession in Maya is so deep and so profound that more than Gautama's indifference, it is her father's absence that hurts her. She never ever blames her father for spoiling her life. She remembers him in a flood of cadenced affection and love.

his thoughts, his life, his attitude, his learning and his career assume

a similar pattern formal as a Mogul garden, gracious and exact, where

breeding, culture, leisure and comfort have been brought to a nice art,

where no single weed is allowed to flower, no single flower to die and

remain on the stalk, no single stalk to grow out of its pruned shape.

As the streams in a Mogul garden flow musically through channels of

carved marble and sandstone, so his thoughts, his life flow, broken into

Small, exquisite patterns by the carving, played upon by altering

nuances of light and shade, but never overstepping their limitations,

never breaking their bounds, always moving onwards with the same

graceful cadence. (CP 45)

Bright attractive adjectives flow unstoppably when Maya thinks of her father. Had Rai sahib been little more cautious, the tragedy could have been averted. But Maya keeps her father away from her marital discard. Never ever blames him. About the laughter of Rai Sahib, her father, Maya says,

It is not a forced laughter as an older man's at a child,

but laughter that comes naturally from a life that has as

much room for love and for pleasure as for order and discipline... (CP 46)

Thus the psychic abnormalcy in Maya, the woman, endears the character to the readers because it finds its expression in love and affection. But in the case of Oedipus complex of Nirode, the impact often takes the form of explosion, flushing out the filth in his mind only to accumulate thoughts filthier than before. So as depicted by Anita Desai Oedipus heightens aversion and Electra nests affection. Perhaps Gender complex in the writer is more powerful than Oedipus and Electra complexes in her characters.

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